

How Iranian shells reach the Mideast's seashores

Contributed by Tony Badran
Monday, 15 February 2010

The recent assassination of Hamas official Mahmoud al-Mabhouh in Dubai has been described as another episode in an ongoing shadow war between Israel and Islamist groups, particularly Hamas and Hezbollah. However, the Mabhouh incident also shed light on another shadowy enterprise underpinning the destabilization of the Middle East and Iran's quest for regional hegemony, namely Tehran's smuggling of arms.

One of the details to emerge from the Mabhouh killing was that he played a key role in smuggling "special weapons" to Gaza, and that his trip to Dubai was related to this task. Dubai has long been a hub for Iran's arms supply efforts to the region. Last year, for instance, the Emirati authorities stopped an Iran-bound ship, the ANL Australia, which was carrying 10 containers of North Korean weapons, including rocket-propelled grenades and components for thousands of short-range rockets.

In recent years, Iranian maritime smuggling of arms has evolved exponentially in the Gulf, across to East Africa and the Red Sea, as well as in the eastern Mediterranean. The networks extend to several hotspots in the region and include Iranian allies and proxies, all of which are used as assets or levers in Iran's efforts to advance its interests in the Middle East.

The smuggling networks span from the Bandar Abbas port in Iran, across to Yemen's Aden and Al-Hudaydah ports, the Aseb port in Eritrea, and Sudan's Port Sudan. The 2002 Karine-A affair, in which Israel intercepted a Palestinian vessel apparently carrying Iranian weapons for Palestinian combatants in Gaza, was a harbinger. The ship used ports in Sudan and Yemen, before heading up the Red Sea, where it was seized.

Last March, a convoy of arms smugglers was bombed, presumably by the Israel Air Force, as it drove from Sudan to Egypt, carrying what some speculated were Iranian Fajr missiles intended for Hamas. Those killed in the strike included Sudanese, Ethiopians and Eritreans, and their route was regularly used by smugglers moving weapons into Egypt. The operation exemplified the complex methods employed by Iran to move weapons into the Sinai, then into Gaza through the Rafah tunnels.

Hezbollah has also smuggled arms into Gaza using similar passages. For example, the Hezbollah cell uncovered by the Egyptian authorities last April was involved in such an operation, as acknowledged by the party's secretary general, Hassan Nasrallah. Egypt's tighter control of its border with Gaza, including its building of a steel barrier, has made smuggling into the territory much more difficult. That is a reason why Iran, Syria, Hezbollah and Hamas have so vehemently attacked Egypt since.

Iranian involvement in East Africa is multifaceted. Tehran had spent time cultivating closer ties with the Sudanese government, and in 2008 the two signed a military cooperation agreement a year after talks began.

A 2006 report (PDF) on Somalia by a UN monitoring group shed more light on Iranian involvement in East Africa. It noted that Tehran explored obtaining uranium from Somalia in return for supplying weapons to the Somali Islamic Courts Union. Moreover, Iran and Hezbollah, as well as a host of other countries including Syria and Libya, were said to have offered, with Eritrean assistance, to support and train ICU combatants.

Fast-forward three years to 2009, to another conflict on the other side of the Red Sea. A top Yemeni intelligence official stated last December that his government had evidence showing Iranian support for the Houthi rebels. "We [have] also intercepted a ship loaded with weapons which we believe originated from Iran," the head of Yemen's National Security Council, Ali Muhammad al-Anisi, told participants at the Manama Dialogue security summit. Meanwhile, the private intelligence firm Stratfor claimed in a report that Iran has been using Eritrean and Somali connections to supply arms to the Houthis through Eritrea's Aseb harbor.

The United States has been more reserved. In a recent interview with Al-Hayat, the US assistant secretary of state for Near East affairs, Jeffrey Feltman, said (in remarks translated from the Arabic) that while Washington was "very aware of the fact that Iran had a history of very negative intervention in other countries' affairs, as is the case in Lebanon and Iraq ... currently we simply don't have evidence that Iranian intervention with the Houthis is as deep as it is with Hezbollah." The statement was hardly a strong denial of Iranian involvement, since Iran's ties to Hezbollah far surpass that with any other armed group.

If Iran's meddling in Gaza has put pressure on Egypt, the Yemeni conflict has earned Tehran a valuable pressure point against Saudi Arabia and a lever with which to project its power with the other Gulf States.

What these episodes show is that naval smuggling has been developing as Iran's preferred method for supplying weapons. The episode of the *Francop* — the ship carrying 500 tons of weapons to Hezbollah and intercepted by Israel last November — was probably the tip of the iceberg. In addition to highlighting the failure of UNIFIL's naval contingent off Lebanese shores, it raised questions about the role of the Beirut port in Iran's efforts to supply Hezbollah with weapons.

Iran's arms smuggling also gives it leverage over allies such as Syria, by turning Damascus into a secondary actor when it comes to Hamas and Hezbollah. The Syrians have become more dependent on Iran and Hezbollah — integrating both more closely into their military strategy and hosting Iranian listening posts and other intelligence assets on Syrian soil. Syria can no longer credibly sell itself as the obligatory mediator to deal with matters related to Hamas and Hezbollah, as the two are now capable of receiving logistical backing directly from Tehran.

Iran is playing an old game in Middle Eastern power politics: building regional influence through arms supplies to those who can further its agenda. For all the talk about non-state actors, the Iranian smuggling networks highlight that political violence and destabilization in the Middle East remain first and foremost a state enterprise.

Tony Badran is a research fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies.